

Emerging from the Linguistic Divide:
Wayson Choy's Self-Translation into the Other
in *Paper Shadows: A Chinatown Childhood*

Manuela Costantino

Salman Rushdie's *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981–1991* has made familiar the view of immigrants as “translated men” (and women) (17). Borne across the world (the word ‘translation’ comes, etymologically, from the Latin for ‘bearing across’), migrants are commonly seen as people living in translation, indeed often “lost in translation,” as Eva Hoffman’s famous autobiography has suggested (*Imaginary Homelands* 17). Rushdie challenges the common view that “something always gets lost in translation” and instead he “cling[s], obstinately, to the notion that something can also be gained” (17). Rushdie’s observation suggests that the concept of translation should be explored in new ways in order to identify not just what gets lost in the translating process but also what new layers of meaning can be added to personal narratives about migrations across different linguistic and cultural spheres. In her introduction to *Changing the Terms: Translating in the Postcolonial Era*, Sherry Simon explains that “[w]e increasingly understand cultural interaction not merely as a form of *exchange* but as *production*. Translation then is not simply a mode of linguistic transfer but a translingual practice, a writing across languages[,] which permits new kinds of conversations and new speaking positions” (28). The migrant writers located in these new “speaking positions” draw on linguistic processes such as abrogation, hybridization, and creolization and combine autobiography, biography, historiography, ethnography, and fiction in order to articulate complex translations that challenge the very notion of “authority” and “authenticity” of “original” sources. Such a challenge, Simon suggests, proposes “translation [as] a necessary means through which knowledge is tested, recontextualized, submitted to critical scrutiny” (*Changing the Terms* 27). Reading the personal narratives of language migrants¹ there-

fore constitutes a form of translation that enables audiences to “test” and “recontextualize” the various forms of knowledge that migrant autobiographers produce.

The decision to explore the linguistic aspect of the migration experience for this paper emerges from my own difficulties with “living in translation.” I emigrated from France twelve years ago and although I arrived in Anglophone Canada with a fairly decent grasp of English, I am reminded daily of my various linguistic limitations. Having to negotiate daily life in a foreign language is often alienating and disempowering and raises practical questions about finding the right words to express oneself accurately, modulating one’s voice properly, and mustering enough energy to follow fast-paced conversations. It also generates intellectual concerns and existential angst because one is not simply manipulating a foreign language, one is also undergoing identity translation. Speaking another language displaces the mother tongue and changes who one is even if one is not quite aware of it. When I go back home, feeling that what I call my “French self” is as I remember it to be the day I left my country, I read incomprehension in my father’s eyes as he is trying to get re-acquainted with his now foreign daughter. I make my mother laugh when I describe to her what a washing machine does because I have forgotten the word for “washer” in French. When I fight with my sister, I know that I have lost the argument when she walks away telling me that I can no longer understand her because I have become “too Canadian.” How can I be “too Canadian” when I still feel “so French”? How can what I see as my “French self” be disappearing with all the preservation work that I have been doing? Of course, the distance that now exists between my family and me is the result of years of separation and distance both geographical and temporal, but it also has a lot to do with the fact that I can now read them in two languages and that I have become a bilingual text that they are trying to decipher with only one language. We are all “lost in translation.” They have lost the person they remembered me to be before I left and I have lost the ability to reproduce this person and to look at things from the French perspective only. The process is irreversible because it is dynamic; once the process of identity translation starts, one can never get back what one considered was one’s “original” self.

The process of identity translation often starts with the new pronunciation of one's name. Some of the most memorable episodes of migrant autobiographies are those that recount the moment when language migrants hear their names pronounced by their English-speaking interlocutors for the first time. In *Hunger for Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez*, Rodriguez describes how he first heard his English name on the first day of school. The nun did not try to pronounce the Spanish version of his name (Ricardo Rodriguez); she directly translated his first name into its English equivalent, thus renaming him. Rodriguez transcribes what he heard as "Rich-heard Road-ree-guess" (11) and remembers experiencing this naming as a distortion of who he was. However, he later came to appreciate the power that the English equivalent of his Spanish name brought him in American society. I, too, experienced Rodriguez's sense of distortion when hearing the anglicized version of my own name. Where French or Italian speakers have never had any problems with the fluidity of the vowel sounds in my first and last names, English speakers introduce syllabic accents, distort the sounds, and destroy the melodious effect that both names are supposed to have when pronounced together. They stumble on the number of syllables and the vowel sounds cannot roll off their tongues. My name sounds complicated and awkward. English speakers speak my name the way I speak English. Early on, I also discovered that when I pronounced my name the way it should be pronounced, English speakers could not understand it; it seemed to be too fluid, too fast for them; there was no syllabic accent to hang on to, no asperity to cling to. So I learned to pronounce my name their way in order to be identified and to feel less awkward. It is ironic of course that it was this awkward pronunciation of my name that actually made me feel less embarrassed to confront my Anglophone interlocutors. I also realize now that I am not the only one to be "lost in translation" as I, too, often mispronounce their names. English names make no sense to me. I need to see them written before I can understand them and even then I need someone to tell me how to pronounce them. If I have now become reconciled to the fact that I will probably never hear my English-speaking interlocutors pronounce my name properly, I cannot feel, like Rodriguez, that the anglicized version

of my name is empowering. It is too cumbersome to be empowering and each attempt at naming reminds me that I am the other.

These very personal experiences with identity translation emerging from the manipulation of the English language lead me to investigate the process of linguistic self-translation in migrant autobiographies. I seek to understand how this process works through the textually reconstructed experiences of others and to define how these experiences can be translated into accessible knowledge for other language migrants and English-speaking Canadians to use. I am clearly not alone in this quest as many theorists in postcolonial literary criticism, cultural studies, and postmodern autobiography studies have addressed the concepts of translated identities and cultures in their work. Françoise Lionnet, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Niranjana Tejaswini among others have all emphasized the importance of translation and the necessity for readers and writers to demonstrate linguistic flexibility in order to confront the multivoicedness of texts that construct hybrid identities. Lionnet has shown that postcolonial identities are necessarily *métissées* in order to braid the multiple aspects that constitute them. *Métissage*, as a multi-voiced practice, enables writers to privilege the differences that living in multiple languages afford them and to shape hybrid identities. Tejaswini has labeled postcolonial people as “people living in translation” (“Colonialism and the Politics of Translation” 36). Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, in her essay “The Politics of Translation,” has established the impossibility for the translator to “translate from a position of monolinguist superiority” (410). This impossibility demonstrates the necessity for linguistic diversity and flexibility in order to engage in “the most intimate act of reading” that translation constitutes (409). In order to be able to render the foreign into the familiar, the translator must be flexible enough to translate herself into the other.

The work of these theorists constitutes an important basis for my study of the particular problems that language migrants encounter when trying to translate themselves into a new linguistic code, but their research often conflates cultural and linguistic translations and manipulates “translation” as the wider concept of “transfer” from one sphere (linguistic, cultural, social, and/or political) to another. In this paper, I

would like to focus specifically on translation as the linguistic shift from the source language to a target language. The vast majority of translators translate from a foreign language into their mother tongue. Their task is to make the unfamiliar (the other) accessible to their home audience by presenting it in familiar linguistic forms. The task of the language migrant is the opposite. If one considers the narrative that articulates the pre-migration self as a source text written in the migrant's mother tongue and the narrated self that emerges from the translating act for his/her Anglophone audience as the target text, the language migrant is translating from the mother tongue to the foreign language. S/he is translating the self into the other. This seems to me to be a particularly important and yet under-studied issue that requires a temporary separation from the wider issue of cultural translation and its social and political consequences.² When I speak of focusing on the linguistic aspect of translation, I do not mean to compare the various words available to a language migrant to translate him/herself into the new language. Rather, I want to focus on his/her own discussion of how the shift in languages has affected his/her way of perceiving and understanding him/herself and reality and how his/her negotiation between the two languages (mother tongue and English) is rendered in the autobiographical text.

In her introduction to *Autobiographical Voices: Race, Gender, Self-Portraiture*, Lionnet observes the concept of race through the lenses of *métissage* and language. Although she recognizes the interdependence of language and culture in the shaping of racial concepts, she argues that "it is language that conditions our concept of race and that the boundaries of that concept change according to cultural, social, and linguistic realities" (12). She proposes a "linguistic and rhetorical approach to the complex question of *métissage*" in order to show "how and why racial difference is a function of language itself" (16). I would like to adopt this "linguistic and rhetorical approach" and apply it to the process of self-translation articulated in Wayson Choy's *Paper Shadows: A Chinatown Childhood* in order to examine to what extent the language he uses in his autobiography shapes the identity that he recreates. Choy is aware of his role as translator and adopts a self-reflexive attitude toward his translation work. His text clearly establishes that he is translating his auto-

biographical persona into English and comments on the ways in which English affects the form of the translation and dictates the “translatability” or “untranslatability” of certain aspects of the self. Choy can be seen as a language migrant, because although he was born in Canada and is now unable to speak fluent Chinese, his original language was Toisanese and he spent his childhood years translating his Chinese identity into a Canadian one. How does Choy negotiate the asymmetrical relationship between his Chinese self and his translated (i.e. English Canadian) self? How does he reconcile the manipulation of the languages that articulate him as “other” with his effort to develop his own sense of identity? What kind of usable knowledge does Choy’s translation work create for a Canadian audience? These are the questions that this paper seeks to answer.

Every language migrant has a border story to tell. The border is often the place where the first act of self-translation takes place as one of the very first things to be translated is the language migrant’s name. The translation can be literal: an English equivalent of the language migrant’s original name is chosen to represent her in the new country, or phonetic: the language migrant’s original name is “translated” by anglicizing its pronunciation. Sometimes, when no equivalent can be found in English, a new name is chosen to identify the language migrant in Canada. Many migrant writers incorporate this translation of the name in their autobiographies and recall the event with particular feelings. The impact of the translation of their names on language migrants depends on the ways in which the translation happens and, most importantly, on the person to whom the power of translation is given.

When this power is given to the language migrant herself or to a relative, the translation of the name seems to have a less traumatic impact on the individual. In *The Concubine’s Children*, Denise Chong describes how her mother, Hing, chose her English name herself. On Hing’s first day in kindergarten, her teacher refused to enter her Chinese name into the class list, ordering the child to go ask her mother to rename her in English. Hing, aware that her mother, May-ying, had no interest in speaking English and would not be able to rename her, took the matter in her own hands and called herself “Winnie” (92). This particular ep-

isode of her mother's life, Chong claims, was the one she liked best (219), because it marked the only moment of her mother's childhood in which she controlled what happened to her. As "Hing," Chong's mother had to obey May-ying and endure the abuse and hardship that life in Chinatown entailed, but as "Winnie," she was able to make her own decisions and shape a life for herself outside of Chinatown, away from the controlling rules of Chinese family life. In this particular case, the process of translation is empowering as it enables Hing, who is made to feel unimportant and invisible in the Chinese world, to impose her presence and become visible in the English-speaking Canadian world. The translation inscribes her into being and opens the way for a future in which she will be able to control the circumstances of her life.

Traditionally, the power of naming is given to God and to parents, but in the experience of language migration, others can usurp that power. In *Losing the Dead: A Family Memoir*, Lisa Appignanesi examines her family's immigration documents and discovers that her brother's name has been "written over, fudged by some official, perhaps perplexed by the slippage between Borensztejn, the Polish original of the family name and its later, more Germanic elision into Borenstein. The result on the card is neither one nor the other" (11). Appignanesi's brother is literally un-named in this anonymous act of translation; he enters Canada without a name. This act of official un-naming might not have been a problem in Appignanesi's family, since her parents were both Jewish and had spent many years changing names and life stories in order to protect their family from Nazi persecution. Many autobiographies by language migrants of Asian descent recall the episode of their ancestors' entry into Canada made possible by the acquiring of false identity papers. Because of very severe immigration restrictions imposed on the Chinese in particular, many people had to buy false papers and enter the country bearing false names. In *Paper Shadows: A Chinatown Childhood*, Wayson Choy remembers the documents that make his birth official and establish his relationship to his parents:

I was born Choy Way Sun, on April 20, 1939, in Vancouver,
in the province of British Columbia, to Nellie Hop Wah, age

thirty-eight, and Yip Doy Choy, age forty-two, the *gai-gee meng*, the *false-paper names*, officially recorded in my parents' immigration documents. (14)

The irony of these documents, of course, is that they make fictions official. Choy's parents' "real" names seem to be Lilly and Toy Choy, although the autobiographer cannot find any "official" documents to confirm this. When researching the history of his father's family, Choy is unable to locate papers that would confirm his father's "real" name.³ His mother, he knows, "had come to Gold Mountain around 1922 as a 'paper bride.' She used the birth document of a married woman born in Canada. This woman had died on a visit to China, but her death was never officially noted" (297). The autobiographical process also reveals to him that the birth certificate that made his birth and English naming official (i.e. English transcription of his Chinese name) is a fake. Choy, aged 58, discovers that he had been adopted at birth. The only fact that Choy is able to confirm is his own naming. From his parents and relatives, he hears the story of his naming many times. His paternal grandfather, *Gung Gung*, came especially from Victoria, six weeks after he was born, in order to name him. In the traditional Chinese naming ceremony, Choy's grandfather "picked up his brush and dipped it into the prepared ink stone. With exquisite strokes of black ink, Grandfather slipped onto the surface of the vermilion-coloured paper the two characters of [his] name" (16). The Chinese characters on this "vermilion-coloured paper" identify Choy more "officially" than the "official" Canadian birth certificate written in English that is supposed to identify him in Canadian society. The English translation of his name in this document is clearly presented as a fake, referring to a fiction. The fact that the Chinese community produced both documents, the fake birth certificate, written by the woman who helped with the adoption, and the naming ceremony document, testifies to the resourcefulness of this community and to the empowering nature of the act of naming.

The fact that Choy presents his Canadian birth certificate as a fake does not mean that he rejects the Anglophone Canadian identity that it introduces. Choy, who grew up responding to the English nickname,

“Sonny,” and learning English at school, soon came to identify as primarily Canadian and not Chinese. His father, aware that the family would never return to China, encouraged this identification, but his mother and older relatives opposed it, thus creating tension in the family. Among Choy’s older relatives, his grandfather was the most vocal in his disapproval, calling his grandson “*Nay mo-no doi!*” “*you no-brain boy!*” (78), because he was unable to speak Chinese correctly. All through the autobiography, Choy allows English transcriptions of Chinese and their translations into English to stand side by side. This incorporation of both, in italics, reminds the reader that he is writing in translation. The English transcriptions of Chinese appear in italics, as is usual for incorporating a foreign language into an English text. The English translation of these transcriptions appears in italics as well in order to remind the reader that the dialogue that Choy is recreating originally happened in Chinese. This technique enables Choy to illustrate the cross-cultural and cross-generational aspect of this act of translation and lead his readers to cross these linguistic and cultural boundaries as well. It might also constitute a way for him to make amends for having lost almost all of his mother tongue and for feeling that he might indeed have become a “*mo-no*.” “A *mo-no*,” Choy explains, “was Chinese and not-Chinese at the same time, someone doomed to be brainless” (78). Young Sonny’s Chinese identity is starting to dissolve in translation. Because he is losing his ability to manipulate his mother tongue with ease, he feels that he is also losing his Chinese identity. The dissolution reaches its climax when Sonny, a very good student in English school, is unable to perform in Chinese school. He fails the first year and his further attempts at mastering the difficult calligraphy of Chinese characters are disappointing. He ends up quitting Chinese school. Recounting one of the many difficulties he encountered in his acquiring of formal Chinese, Choy remembers being asked to transcribe the ideogram “I,” which he evaluates as “the toughest one to write ... a killer ideogram, drawn with seven breathtaking strokes. One *upward-dash*; two long, opposing-facing *curves with hooks*; and three *criss-crosses*—or was that two *dashes* and three *criss-crosses*?” (221). Choy uses italics in the English text to inscribe the description of the different characters that form the ideo-

gram. Even though these are English words, he renders them with italics to indicate translation. The italics in the English text enables the reader to visualize the Chinese ideogram and in a sense “read” the Chinese characters while reading the English sentence. Choy is allowing Chinese to affect the English language that he is writing in, thus incorporating plurilingualism in an apparently monolingual sentence and making the process of translation visible.

Choy’s encounter with the Chinese “I” contrasts sharply with Hong Kingston’s encounter with the American “I” in *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*. In her memoir, Hong Kingston remembers young Maxine’s inability to pronounce the American “I.” She describes the anxiety that her confrontation with this “I” produced:

I could not understand “I.” The Chinese “I” has seven strokes, intricacies. How could the American “I,” assuredly wearing a hat like the Chinese, have only three strokes, the middle so straight? Was it out of politeness that this writer left off strokes the way a Chinese has to write her own name small and crooked? No, it was not politeness; “I” is a capital and “you” is lower-case. I stared at that middle line and waited so long for its black center to resolve into tight strokes and dots that I forgot to pronounce it. (166–67)

Even though Hong Kingston alludes to the different number of strokes between the two characters used to refer to “I” in English and in Chinese and to the fact that both seem to be “wearing a hat,” her translation of the Chinese ideogram “I” into English is less visible than Choy’s. This passage, however, enables her to comment on the process of self-translation. By recalling her inability to understand how two characters that look so completely different could be referring to the same thing, she is, of course, demonstrating the most common method that people use when engaging in the act of translation: she is trying to find an exact equivalent in English for what she understands “I” to be in Chinese. Most importantly, however, she is making visible the fact that words do not simply refer to people or things, they also contain concepts that define the reality that they are representing. She reproduces

young Maxine's realization that the assertive way in which the capital "I" stands for the self reveals the idea that American people have of an individual's identity. This idea contrasts so sharply with the concept of the Chinese "I" in general, and of the female Chinese "I" in particular, that young Maxine remains unable to pronounce it, thus denying herself access to an American identity and condemning herself to a life in mistranslation as her teachers continue to read her as "zero IQ."

Young Sonny Choy has the opposite problem and wonders how "if [he] could not read or write the language, if [he] could not learn to speak the Sam Yup Cantonese dialect that was being taught, how could [he] ever be Chinese? [He] thought right away of giving up on being Chinese. 'I'm Canadian,' [he] said" (238). Part of Sonny's distress in Chinese school is that he is being taught a formal form of Cantonese that is different from the Toisanese dialect that he speaks at home.⁴ He is actually learning Chinese in translation and does not have any practical use for the formal dialect he is learning in school. The only place where he could perform this aspect of his Chinese identity is at Chinese school. "All respectable Chinatown families felt obliged, even coerced," Choy explains, "to send their sons and daughters to one of the half-dozen private Chinatown schools. A Chinese boy or a Chinese girl must be taught Chinese, in the formal Mandarin or Cantonese dialects" (214). The irony of the situation lies in the fact that by doing what they believe is their duty as Chinese parents, Toy and Lily Choy lead their son to question and reject his Chinese identity. Sonny is too young to realize that his inability to speak and write formal Cantonese does not mean that he has to renounce being Chinese. Instead of simply rejecting this particular performance of Chinese identity, Sonny feels that he must shed his entire Chinese identity. What he really rejects though, as Choy comes to realize later, is not his Chinese identity but the imposition of formal Cantonese. Sonny can understand that English and Toisanese are two different languages that he needs for different aspects of his life, but he cannot see the point of being forced to learn a language that does not bear a direct connection to his daily reality. Sonny's behavior clearly highlights the difficulty of "living in translation" and the connection between language and identity.

Choy's autobiographical recreation of this early dilemma exposes what Antoine Berman calls "the trials of the foreign." Berman explains that translation is a process that uncovers what is foreign in both the foreign language and the mother tongue. In other words, Berman suggests that translators are not simply dealing with foreign languages, they are also discovering that their own mother tongue can be foreign to them because the act of translation casts a new light on it. By being coerced to learn formal Cantonese, Sonny is confronted with his own "foreign-ness;" he is made to feel like "the other." The irony, of course, is that unable to feel Chinese in formal Cantonese, he identifies himself as Canadian, not remembering that the white population will "read" his skin tone and slanted eyes and identify him as Chinese, thus denying him the identity that he is claiming.

Sonny's "trial of the foreign" in Chinese school and his feeling that he must identify as Canadian emphasize the familial division that "life in translation" has already imposed on the Choys. In one of the rare episodes of closeness between Sonny and his grandfather, Sonny asks his *gung gung* why he looks different from the other boys he plays with at the park and his grandfather replies: "*nay-hei tong-yung—you're Chinese*" (136). His mother joins in the explanation and tells him that Chinese people are "*gee gai yun—our own people*" (137). Sonny's reaction to this conversation was to feel that "[he] belonged" (137). This episode, set before Sonny has to go to Chinese school, demonstrates the child's attachment to his Chinese identity and marks his belonging to his family and the Chinese community. It also points to the implications of his "forced" identification as Canadian. Sonny feels "forced" to choose one identity over the other, not because Chinese and English clash, but because formal Cantonese clashes with his mother tongue. By claiming to be Canadian, Sonny does not simply express his frustration at being unable to master formal Cantonese, he also renounces belonging to "his own people" and he starts participating even more willingly in the process of translation that will ultimately lead him to "lose almost all his first language" (137).

Choy presents himself as very much in control of his linguistic choices. He recreates himself as a determined young boy and establishes his

linguistic agency early on. His desire to be identified as Canadian and to speak English seems to be an innate attribute of Choy's autobiographical persona when young. This desire is made particularly obvious in Sonny's decision to speak *Chinglish* against his mother's wishes. When his mother complains to his father that Sonny refuses to obey her and speak Chinese, Toy Choy replies that the child will grow up to be Canadian and should therefore be allowed to favor English over Chinese. At that moment, Choy recalls, "Mother looked at [him] and saw the victory in [his] eyes" (83). This reaction marks the immaturity of the child, but it also reveals the power struggle at stake in the issue. Sonny claims the right to speak the language of his choice and by doing so he establishes the right to identify as he pleases. This preferred identification emerges from his love of North American cultural icons such as the "cow-boy" and, most importantly, from the power that English affords him. Because he can speak English, his mother must rely on him for translation during their rare excursions outside of Chinatown. English also constitutes his way in into story reading and story making. Story reading becomes Sonny's favorite subject in kindergarten and pretending to know how to read becomes one of his favorite games. After school, he rushes home and uses *Chinglish* to "read" the stories read in class to his mother and grandfather. In these reading sessions, the child is in total control of the situation. He "reads" the English words printed on the page and translates them into a mixture of Chinese and English that his mother and grandfather can understand. Both languages are interwoven to form the "perfect Chinglish" that Sonny requires to fit the needs of the particular situation he is in (144). Even if he could actually read the English words printed on the page, his audience would not understand them and telling the story in Chinese would not convey their foreign-ness, so the child allows both languages to come together to fit the reality that he is dealing with. Once again, Choy makes visible the process of translation and opens up a linguistic space in which the child can experience being Chinese and Canadian simultaneously.

This space in which the child experiments with translation in the way that is most natural to him constitutes the only space in which he is not "lost in translation." In this space, he does not need to choose

one language or one identity to perform in. The boundaries between the two languages and the different identities that they delineate dissolve in the act of translation. The type of translation that Choy advocates here is one that paradoxically makes the act of translation visible (two languages are visibly interwoven or intertwined) while erasing the boundaries between the two different languages (they share a common space and interact with each other). Choy is presenting translation as a kind of *tissage* or weaving in which two languages can come together to create a third one in the same way as the different threads of the *tissage* come together to form a whole. Choy is not guilty of what Walter Benjamin calls “the basic error of the translator.” This “basic error,” Benjamin explains, “is that [the translator] preserves the state in which his own language happens to be instead of allowing his language to be powerfully affected by the foreign tongue” (22). In his manipulation of Chinglish, Choy allows his language (English) to be affected by “the foreign tongue” (Chinese). Chinese constitutes the foreign tongue for most of Choy’s English speaking readers, of course, but also for him in a sense as he has lost most of the language that was once his mother tongue. Autobiographical reconstruction enables Choy to manipulate translation as a mode of linguistic production and not simply as a form of transfer from one language to another. The autobiographical text also provides Choy with a space in which he can reproduce the oral form of that third language into a written form. This further translation, from the oral to the written form, makes the child’s early experiment with this third language official as it gives it a reality that it had until then only in the autobiographer’s memory. The rendering of Choy’s memory appears in Chinglish on the page and forces the reader to live that experience in the “original” language: i.e. in the language in which the experience actually happened, not in the language of translation (English). This rendering enables Choy to impose “the trial of the foreign” on his audience, leading them to experience what it feels like to be a foreigner in one’s own language and casting a new light on a language that they had perhaps taken for granted.

Choy’s recreation of his childhood self as a determined young boy who consciously chooses to manipulate both Chinese and English in

ways that fit his needs creates an overall sense of continuity in Sonny's linguistic development. Except for the formal Cantonese that he rejects, Sonny navigates in the Toisanese dialect of his family and in English without any serious problems. Choy discusses the problems that can arise from imposed translation in the mother tongue, but he does not present Chinese-English bilingualism as an issue that is particularly difficult for the child to deal with. This relative absence of problems in Sonny's progression towards bilingualism can be explained by the fact that he is acquiring both Chinese and English from the bottom up (i.e. in slow increments from the requirements of daily life) and not from the top down (i.e. from a school book without a progressive practical application in daily life). One of the main advantages of learning a foreign language from the bottom up is that the learning process and the experience are simultaneous; one learns the language because one lives in that language. This experiential way of learning a foreign language is particularly dynamic because the conditions of learning are almost the same as the conditions in which one learns one's mother tongue. This is especially true of young Sonny Choy who grows up and learns to speak in a Chinese speaking environment in an English speaking world. As a young child, his sense of identity is also more malleable than that of an adult and he does not experience speaking English as an imposition on his mother tongue and on his Chinese self. Speaking both languages often constitutes a game for him and he is quite comfortable speaking "Chinglish" and being identified as Chinese and Canadian simultaneously.

Choy's autobiographical translation work aims at confronting linguistic, cultural, and generational forms of difference that generate "discomfort" (for both his relatives and his readers) and articulating ways of interpreting and composing with this difference. Because the translation process is never complete (i.e. something always gets lost in the translation, exact equivalence does not exist, etc), a dose of discomfort is always present and therefore prevents the articulation of "comfortable positions" from which to observe difference. His memoir's linguistic strategies therefore constitute a crucial site for the production of a form of knowledge that can destabilize the Canadian mainstream's

understanding of the language migrant's experience and generate new ways of dealing with linguistic difference in Canada. In doing so, *Paper Shadows* provides readers with a concrete example of Angelika Bammer's suggestion that multicultural communities need to learn to communicate multilingually. Bammer analyzes the impact of the migration experience on families and the communities they belong to and argues for the importance of reconnecting the different generations of migrant families in order to re-establish the historical continuity that the migration experience has disrupted and to help insert this community in the wider cultural sphere of the nation. She suggests that one way of achieving these goals is "to construct the family language multilingually. Such a construct allows for families with more than one native culture or more than one mother tongue to expand into, rather than fragment over, a dialogic space in which 'family' can be spoken in a variety of ways and need not be translated to be communicable" (97). Bammer is articulating here what I think is a productive way of looking at translation. When she argues that migrant families need to develop "dialogic spaces" in which to communicate instead of relying on translation, she is pointing at the restrictive meaning commonly attributed to translation: i.e. the faithful linguistic transfer of information from one language to another meant for the linguistic and cultural mainstream. Bammer is calling for new ways of conducting conversations about migration experiences, ways that would enable the different speakers to draw on their linguistic and cultural background and contribute to the discussion without having to interpret in a traditional way the information that they are sharing. A non-traditional understanding of translation as illustrated in Choy's memoir can provide such new ways of communication. These new forms of communication are essential to the relationships that autobiographers establish with their readers and to their joined task of articulating private and collective memories that can help generate the knowledge necessary to articulate complicated and shifting notions of Canadian identity and history.

Notes

- 1 “Language migrants” is the expression that Mary Besemerer uses in *Translating One’s Self: Language and Selfhood in Cross-cultural Autobiography* to describe writers who articulate their autobiographical narratives in languages that are not their mother tongues.
- 2 This temporary focus on the linguistic aspect of translation is not meant to oversimplify the very complex issue of translation. I am well aware that, language being the main medium for culture, the act of translation is necessarily multi-dimensional and simultaneously linguistic, cultural, social, and political. However, I would like to separate these different aspects for the time being in order to bring more clarity to the particular issue of linguistic translation and its impact on identity formation.
- 3 The fact that Choy was an adopted child and that Nellie Hop Wah and Yip Doy Choy (a.k.a Lily and Toy Choy) were not his biological parents reinforces the irony of papers making total fictions official.
- 4 Romy Clark and Roz Ivanic demonstrate that schooling and language education do more than simply educate children. They also expose students to the values and ideologies that the dominant culture favors. They explain, for instance, that “written language has a normative, disciplinary, and discriminatory role in social life.... Adherence to standard conventions in these technical aspects of written language has come to be used as a criterion for assessing people’s intelligence and even moral worth” (189). This thinking emphasizes the connection between linguistic mastery and identity articulation and is particularly relevant for this present discussion of Sonny’s feeling of inadequacy in Chinese school. Because he is unable to master standard written forms of Cantonese, his teachers judge him incompetent and he is led to conclude that he cannot be Chinese.

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